



NOLA FOR LIFE Symposium Keynote

December 8, 2014

At the very infancy of our nation,
a few brave
soon-to-be Americans boldly declared our independence,
and they chose
these words:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,
that all men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator
with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of
Happiness.”

That is what we as Americans promised to the world
and we as
Americans promised to
each other.

It is the civic covenant that binds us all together –
our collective DNA.

But every
now and then
a catastrophic event - sometimes it is
a disaster like Katrina which left
American citizens stranded at the Superdome.

Sometimes, it is
an event between human beings
that morphs and becomes cataclysmic– like the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric
Garner –
that stops us in our tracks -
won't allow us to
look away -
and makes us wonder: are we living up to the covenant made in our founding
documents?

Then in a whisper -

as if just speaking to ourselves,
we are forced to ask - is this really
who we are as Americans?

This is one of those moments.

Morally,
economically,
and for the good of
this nation,
we must reiterate, recommit
and fulfill this sacred covenant.

To do so,
we must face, acknowledge and commit to eliminate, the last vestiges of this nation's
original sin.

Indeed,
in a million ways
since our founding,
we have made stunning progress
from the depths of the slave ship
to the White House, but many say
not enough has changed.

Well, consider this,
my father,
born in 1930,
knew sons and daughters of slaves and I as a child
saw him tear down walls built by
Jim Crow.

Now, it is a new era, but to this day,
my children can still
sit on their grandfather's knee, look into the
same eyes,
touch the same hands that saw and touched the children of slaves.

Yes, it is a new era,
but to this day,
for many African Americans in this city and country,
the figurative chains of the past
are still there.

As William Faulkner noted for us,
"the past is never dead. It's not even past."

From day one,
for many
African American children
the deck is still stacked against them.

Think about our struggling neighborhoods,
the shootings,
poor schools, inadequate
health care,
no jobs,
failed institutions, broken families.

And although we are supposed to be
one nation,
one city,
indivisible,
with justice for all -
the truth is
sometimes it still seems like black lives do not matter
and that justice
does not extend to everyone equally.

We may very well be halfway home,
but we should be able to acknowledge that we still have
a long way to go.

If you really want to understand how far
we still have to go
and how steep the path is for many,
look at the fact that 52% of
African American men in New Orleans
are not working.

And consider that African Americans make up close to
40 percent of America's
prison population,
but only represent
13 percent of the total population.

Or you could just
go into an
elementary school in many of our neighborhoods.

Ask a classroom of
8-year olds

a couple of questions:

Who has lost a friend or a family member to violence...?

Who has had to run for cover from gunfire...?

Who has seen a
dead body
or blood on the streets?

Who has heard gunshots in the night?

The answers
our children give
will bring you to your knees.

It is a story of innocence lost.

A child's wondrous dreams
dimmed in the face of a harsh, brutal reality that no one should have to confront at such
a tender age.

Indeed,
for New Orleans,
like in every city across the country –
Chicago,
Philadelphia,
Detroit,
L.A.,
New York,
Atlanta,
Cleveland,
Ferguson,
Missouri,
Sanford, Florida - sometimes it feels like we are standing on the edge of a cliff.

In the United States, instead of being indivisible,
we remain divided.

Divided by race.

Divided by class.

We live a block away from one another,
but are often
a world apart.

There are
many examples of this in our beloved City of New Orleans-

Treme and the
French Quarter...

Carrollton and Hollygrove...

The Garden District - just a few blocks away, and a world apart, from Central City.

I want you to imagine two children representing the hundreds of kids
living on opposite sides of that
all-important border,
St. Charles Avenue.

They live just a few blocks away from
each other,
but are a world apart truly in every sense.

In Central City....
there is a little boy named James.

He is 14 years old, goes to public school and stays near Seventh Street and Dryades
with his mom and two younger brothers.

It is a one bedroom apartment in a long thin rundown building.

Small, but the landlord takes Section 8
and it is close to family.

Every morning, James' mom catches the 530 bus to a downtown hotel.

She won't get back from her second job
as a security guard until around 9 or 10 that evening.

Meanwhile, James gets home from school. Not much going on there in the afternoon.

As the sun sets, James is restless
and walks to hang with friends at his corner.

He is a good kid and his mom tries her best, but the drugs,
easy money,
guns are everywhere.

The lure of the street is strong

and most of the time there is no one at home to help him stay on a good path.

One day,
James' mom finds a pistol under his bed.

Imagine a young man like James,
14 years old,
in tears,
telling her
the same thing I have heard from kids
just as young:
'it is for protection'.

I hear "Mayor, out here it's either kill or be killed."

Meanwhile,
only 4-blocks away towards
Prytania Street in the Garden District, imagine another
14-year old,
Mike.

He goes to
private school
and his family lives in a large four-bedroom house.

Mom is a lawyer
and Dad is in finance.

They both work long and hard downtown, but the nanny is home for Mike when
school lets out,
or he is at practice for the tennis, football, or basketball teams
or he stays after school for chess club or quiz bowl.

Every night,
the family eats dinner, relaxes and
does homework.

With his parents' help and that of a tutor that they can afford,
Mike is doing well
in math.

Mike in the
Garden District
hopes to follow in his Dad's footsteps.

But James in

Central City
cannot hope,
because his dad
is in Angola.

On Mardi Gras Day, these two boys of
New Orleans
head to
St. Charles Avenue, drawn by the backbeat of Rebirth,
the bounce of
Al Johnson's
Carnival Time
and the rally of the Zulu King.

One watches the
world go by
from the lake side of
St. Charles,
the other from the
river side of that
same divide.

For a brief moment, they occupy
the same world.

Their hearts beat to the same rhythm.

They move and dance in the crowd with carefree abandon.

Who knows,
maybe their hands touch,
or their heads knock as they reach for the same pair of beads or for the prized coconut,
sharing for a brief moment,
the synthesis of
time,
geography,
culture,
race,
music,
and a shared history.

Both, in the same spot, at the same moment, touching the
same thing that they both want –
really a moment of perfection
suspended in time.

But then,
like a bubble,
the moment bursts, dissipates into thin air and is gone forever.

Both retreat to
their sides of
St. Charles to wait in anticipation for the next opportunity to come
as the next float arrives.

But finally,
the sun-sets
and they go back home,
just a few blocks away, but to a different world.

In James' world, Central City,
the average
household income
is just under **\$36,000**.

In Mike's world,
on the other side of
St. Charles Ave -
a few blocks away in the Garden District -
the average household income is over \$128,000.

And in Central City **69%** of all households are run by
a single parent,
mostly single mothers- in the Garden District, it is **3%**.

To make ends meet
a single parent in Central City earning minimum wage must work day and night - two or
three jobs.

So that often means kids are out of school **hours** before their parents even leave work.

This is especially scary for a parent who works late and lives in Central City
because since 2010 there have been over 256 shooting victims
in that neighborhood alone.

Walk just a few blocks away and it is a different world -
there has been
one shooting victim in the Garden District over the last four years.

So knowing all of this - think again about
14 year olds James and Mike,
each walking home

that Mardi Gras night.

For James,
like on many nights in Central City,
maybe there is a shooting in the neighborhood and the NOPD is searching the area.

Witnesses say - young black man in a hoodie.

Looking for the shooter,
the cops are on edge and when they see James with his
hood up,
they pull up fast and they pull up close.

James jerks his hand out of his pocket.

He is holding a
black cell phone.

Unfortunately we know how this story might end.

Sometimes this is how tragedies happen
and for young men like James,
the margin of error between life and death is thin indeed.

And if we replace James with a
young man like Mike from the
Garden District
the difference in that margin of error would perhaps be the thing allowing Mike to live or
James to die.

The truth is
everyone wants to be treated fairly.

No one wants their children to be collateral damage – whether the bullet comes from the
end of a drug dealer's gun
or from a
police officer's pistol
or from someone else shooting in fear.

I think of
Trayvon Martin
walking quickly through the rain with his Skittles and
iced tea.

He was killed
not because he was doing anything wrong, but because of

the fear in
George Zimmerman's heart
and the fear in that moment.

Last week,
it was Michael Brown's family's
first Thanksgiving without him.

An empty chair sat
at the holiday table - gone too soon.

This pain stretches from Michael's family in Ferguson
to Eric Garner's family
in New York -
they too must
fill the void left.

But the death and destruction
does not stop here with Trayvon, Michael or Eric.

In New Orleans,
just over the last several months alone <94> dead,
murdered on our streets –
nearly all of them – young African American men.

<139> dead
so far this year.

<785> since I became Mayor.

Let us
take a moment to remember
just a few of these victims:

Cornell Glover,

Aaron White,

Tyrone Lacoste,

Skye Johnson,

Troy Maxwell,

Robert Hamilton,

Richard Yaeger,

Jazz-men Anderson,

Joseph Duplessis,

Arielle King,

Johan Kenner,

Dewayne Joseph,

Racquel Gillard,

Deion Robair,

Casey Craddock,

and 15 year old George Carter, III.

Their untimely deaths mark a sort of
dark routine
and apart from the heartbroken friends and families
whose lives will
never be the same;
by and large
nobody says anything.

No marches in the street.

No boycotts.

No wall-to-wall
press coverage.

Nothing.

Barely a word for these hundreds of lives.

But I don't only think about the victims.

I also think about those trying to find the killers of these young men -
our police officers.

Being a cop

is not easy.

To do the job means early mornings,
late nights,
hours of hard,
stressful work
and moments of extreme danger.

And for every cop on the beat
there is a family at home-
a wife,
husband,
mother,
father,
son or daughter
who sacrifice in their own right.

Our police officers
are gone a lot
and never know if they will come home ok at the end of their shift.

And there is reason for the worry.

The streets are a dangerous place.

Since 2011,
8 New Orleans
police officers
have been shot in the line of duty.

Officer
Terrance Hilliard.

Officer Tony Mayfield.

Officer Mike Asevedo.

Sergeant
Sidney Jackson.

Officer
John PASS-ah-row.

Officer Troy Pichon.

Officer

Kevin Doucette.

Officer
Jonathan Smith.

And I also remember Officer
Rodney Thomas.

He was my friend and the 110th member of the NOPD
to be killed in the
line of duty.

Trying to help and protect us.

The loss and pain
is searing.

Think of Rodney's
son and daughter
who have lost a father forever.

And in the eyes of
Mrs. Rosalyn Thomas
I have seen the overwhelming grief of a wife who will never see her beloved again.

It is the same look,
the same grief
of a mother who
loses their child to murder.

And just as the community
demands an end
to the terrible practice of racial profiling which targets people based on the color of their
skin, not by actions,
the community should likewise not judge police officers by their profession,
but by their actions as well.

They are people too.

They are our brothers and sisters.

They are our friends.

And sometimes
they get shot
trying to help us.

There is no doubt that we have to reform
how we police.

There is no argument that Americans
have the right to protest peacefully.

But violent protests that burn buildings and terrorize neighborhoods are an injustice as
well,
and are not an acceptable way forward.

So there is a
tie that binds together the riots in Ferguson and the culture of violence on our streets.

Make no mistake – The nightly unrest in Ferguson
and the constant murder in
New Orleans
are parts of the
same whole –poisonous fruit harvested from the same tree.

We should remember that,
because it is true.

Until all lives matter, there are no truths that we can hold to be
self-evident.

Until we all weep and we all march for
every life lost,

and until we speak up for each other's claim to unalienable rights,

We will not be able to realize peace in our communities and fulfill the lofty promises of
this nation.

Over the last 5 years my top priority
has been to change the culture of violence on our streets,
to a culture of peace,
because each
violent act
tears at our city's soul, and each murder leaves a wide wake of destruction –
a long line of victims.

A young child
who loses a father.

A mother's heart

is broken.

A family is left alone.

And in a
downward spiral violence begets violence.

The son of
today's victim
picks up a gun
and tomorrow there are 2 tragedies – perpetrator and victim.

We are losing
a whole generation of promise
and these fresh victims lay cold in a
mass grave shared by hundreds of thousands of Americans.

Consider this,
from 1980-2014,
over 8,000 people,
a disproportionate number
African American men, were murdered
just in New Orleans.

That's more people lost to murder in
New Orleans over the last few decades
than all the
New Orleanians and Louisianans
killed in action
during World War I, World War II,
Korea,
Vietnam,
the Persian Gulf War, the War in Iraq,
and the War in Afghanistan – combined.

So it has been decades of
mass murder in
slow motion on the streets of America
and on the streets of New Orleans.

And this is what
I have learned
over the last five years-
it is not too late –
this problem can be fixed,
we can change.

But the solution must go further and higher, it must be bigger and bolder and everyone has a role to play.

We must
work together
to bring justice to the streets,
then and only then,
will we have peace.

But in the past -
and sometimes in the present -
far too often,
instead of truly grappling with our problems,
we desperately look for quick fixes,
we want to
'get tough' –
more prisons,
more guards,
more guns.

But how can we
live together
if we are afraid of each other?

It just makes things worse.

That said -
let's be clear -
the hardened criminals who terrorize our neighborhoods
need to go to jail, period.

But we can't just arrest or imprison our way out of this entire problem.

We've tried that
and it doesn't work.

And many nations with fewer people in prison have less crime,
less murder,
less unrest.

Nationally,
around **\$70 billion** is spent every year on corrections.

That's about the same as the budget for the entire US Department of Education.

Indeed, on average New Orleans
public schools
spend
up to \$13,000
per pupil per year.

To incarcerate
one person for
1 year...
it costs about **\$30,000** depending on the state.

That would get you
a first rate education
at a top university.

It is clear that
we need to change our approach.

We must be tough AND smart on crime.

In New Orleans,
to find this better path towards justice
we went to
police officers on the beat
and mothers of
murder victims.

We went to
expert criminologists and held focus groups with young men
in the game -
all to ask -
how can we solve this problem?

And you know something,
from the
hardened detective
to the 15-year old kid from the neighborhood,
they all told us essentially
the same thing - solutions have to
hit the streets with a special focus on prevention and justice.

From this wisdom,
we designed our cutting edge comprehensive murder reduction strategy - NOLA FOR
LIFE.

It is smart, holistic,

hits the streets
and focuses on
what matters most.

But, during these conversations and others,
we heard
something else about the issues of violence facing our city,
and what we heard was about race.

And the arguments go round and round.

We heard
some people
express their truth about
dysfunctional families and what they see
as a murder problem almost exclusively afflicting
black neighborhoods.

We heard others say that there is
no justice system,
only an
injustice system
and in the
black community
it is the police that are the problem
along with other failed institutions and racism.

Still, others said
it won't matter without personal responsibility and we each need to take care of our own
business and help take care of the people around us.

And some just pointed the finger -
pick yourself up by your own boot straps.

And then the predictable response – How can we
pick ourselves up
by our own boot straps if we have no boots.

There is
no opportunity,
no jobs,
even for the many talented individuals willing to work hard.

Round and round we go... and then we stop.

All the above arguments are valid – but this is generally where we stop.

Each contains
part of the truth,
and it all converges
to make a toxic mix that produces misunderstanding, injustice,
violence,
death,
broken communities and a divided and weakened nation.

We must keep going.

Here is the point,
not either/or -
it is both/and;
we must keep going.

Obviously, the issue of murder goes deep
and although our NOLA FOR LIFE strategy is working – murder is at
a near 30 year low
and we are sustaining those gains --

We still have
more murder than nearly anywhere else in America.

And, a big
cultural change
must occur in our city to truly solve this problem for good.

It is a daunting task,
no doubt.

But we have
been here before.

I am thinking back to right after Katrina, when we were
on our knees
and necessity became the mother of invention.

To survive
we had to tackle
tough problems.

So we started
from the ground up whether that meant rebuilding our homes, schools,
or health care system.

Now, we need to
go further to tackle other tough problems like racism,
inequality,
the culture of violence, and criminal justice reform.

First, we have to
state and believe that
self-evident truth -
the obvious -
that all men are created equal
and that for
justice to exist,
it must extend to all.

As I have said repeatedly
over the years -
during both of my
inauguration speeches,
at the National Urban League,
at the Aspen Institute, the US Conference of Mayors,
the National Press Club,
and at countless other occasions,
I've said
black lives matter, lives being lost to murder on our streets matter
and there is something we can and must
do about it.

With NOLA FOR LIFE we focus on prevention and stopping the shooting.

We push back against what is an evil notion - that the lives of young African American
men are somehow
less valuable than the rest of us.

We've all heard it before -
"just thugs
killing thugs.
There's nothing
you can do about it."

But through
NOLA FOR LIFE
we say -
that is a lie.

Every life is precious and these young men were not predestined to this fate.

With the
Welcome Table for racial reconciliation, we bridge the gap
to heal old wounds
so 'those people'
can become something more than faceless 'others'.

'They'
becomes 'friend'
and we share with our friends,
we help our friends.

With our new economic opportunity strategy
we say that
no one is going to be left behind
and that anyone
willing to work hard should be able to
find a job --
their pathway to prosperity.

Work brings dignity.

But the real accomplishment since Katrina
goes beyond our important plans, strategies and initiatives.

We as a people
have changed.

We said –
we will not be quiet.

We cannot afford to stay in denial.

We will
tackle our problems, put our hands to the plow,
sow good seed in good soil,
and find a way to make life better.

Because we have
no other choice.

No one is coming to save us.

Some are cynical
and believe that
we cannot complete the hard change
we have begun.

Some believe that there is nothing
we can do about babies living in poverty and young kids having no real future beyond
guns and drugs.

Some believe that black lives really
do not matter
and that the murder of thousands of young, African American men on our streets is to
be accepted,
like it is part of the natural order of things.

And some believe that the age old wounds of yesterday
can never heal,
that we will always be a nation and city divided by race – sometimes
a block away,
but a world apart.

I reject those assertions.

All lives matter. This problem can be fixed.

I am here to say that we are each
bound together
as one people, indivisible,
with one shared destiny.

By that declaration made so long ago,
we go forward together or not at all.

We must
keep pressing on, working together
and moving forward... one step at a time.

And when historians look back to this time many years from now they will see a people
who came together
to do what was hard for the sake of
what was right
and change the course of history for
the generations to come.

Our lives,
the lives of our children,
and the future of our beloved Country depends on it.

Remember the words spoken so long ago - all men are created equal -
but these are just words on a page.

The real work is making the jump from aspiration to reality. That is why you all have been called here today.

It is about taking
one step at a time, and delivering on the promise as we march towards a more perfect union.